No. 94

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

"You don't love me as you used to," she said passionately. "You could not say such cruel things if you did."

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MARJORIE wondered what sort of a reception the delinquent would get, and, how he would like it—and then he came in. But Marjorie drew back. She did not want her cousin to greet her first. She was conscious of a feeling of dread, of wanting to avert something.

"Got any tea left?" were Ericsen's unromantic words on entering.

Alice broke across with a reproachful—

"You've been away all the afternoon. I thought you were never coming!"

Marjorie saw the dilation in her cousin's grey eyes, the quick contraction of the brows, as if he were both taken aback and displeased.

She had not meant to see, but the merest involuntary glance had been enough. She busied herself with the tea, and felt her heart in her throat, not daring to lift her eyes.

And yet she knew Graham bent over his wife, and could almost see him take the white hands held out to him.

He kissed them, half laughing! Alice turned from him when he would have kissed her lips, then, as he lifted himself, she caught his hand.

"Don't go, Graham! I didn't mean that!" she said vehemently. "Kiss me! You stay so long away—I miss you. I've been so lonely."

"What—with Marjorie?" said Ericsen. He sat down on the sofa, and stroked one of the soft hands.

Marjorie met his eyes and smiled.

"I haven't been here so very long," she said, "and I don't make up for you. You'l have some tea? No, don't get up—I'll bring it to you there."

"Marjorie waits on everyone," said Alice, in lazy satisfaction. But Ericsen rose and intercepted his

cousin.

"It's rather out of order to let her wait on me, though," he said. "Thanks, my pet," taking his cup from her. "And how much have I missed of you?"

"About an hour," said she. "Quite a visitation."

"Make another visitation, then," said Ericsen.

He did not return to the sofa, but dropped into a chair near the tea table, and talked to his cousin; for Alice had closed her eyes, and took no part in the conversation; even when appealed to, only answering with a smile.

Marjorie did not stay long. She said she would be pushed for time, as it was getting late. Graham protested, but Alice checked him.

"It's no kindness to Marjorie to make her late," she said.

"I'm afraid I was only thinking of being kind to myself," said Ericsen, while Marjorie laughed.

She went home with an odd, disagreeable impression, which had not been dissipated by Alice's affectionate good-bye. She took herself to task for being so extremely fanciful.

If Graham, the person chiefly concerned, were so satisfied—and he was certainly wrapped up in his beautiful wife—who else need have misgivings?

Yet he had not ben pleased when Alice reproached him, though he had taken the reproach well—with a sort of indulgence, indeed, as one shows to an invalid.

Did he, then, think Alice in such delicate health? Was she so delicate? Marjorie fell unconsciously into the attitude of a critic, but a critic who all the time tries to disavow his criticisms.

Graham would most decidedly have disavowed them had he known of them.

He gave way to Alice's demands on him, angry

with himself at his momentary displeasure. To be with her, to humor her, he gave up first one thing, then another.

He made her the arbiter of his movements; her plans were consulted before he made any of his own.

Even that quest he had set his heart on, to pursue which he had returned home so soon—even that was left more and more to the detective he employed.

Marjorie looked on silently. Didn't he see that Alice was generally well enough to go where he went?

But Graham's marriage was still but a few months old, the bride the all-in-all, and, especially now, limitless tenderness was her due.

He asked no questions, he criticized nothing — until it stole on him vaguely that there was a dull disappointment somewhere; but he could not define it.

He could not have told when he began to see that Alice never spoke of the unborn child, never made plans for it, seemed almost indifferent about it.

He shook off the idea as a wrong, a disloyalty, but instinctively he, too, grew silent, hid his gladness and his hopes in his own soul, so sensitive that it must have full sympathy or none at all.

There is a love which withers beneath imperfection, which cannot withstand the sight of the dross that mixes with the matchless gold of its idol.

It is mercilessly exacting; it demands that there shall be no dross, which to another sort of love makes the idol more precious.

So, when Graham Ericsen could no longer blind himself to that grain of dross in his idol, the inexorable process of waning had begun. He did not see, or know, or understand.

He only asked; Why was this coldness to even his child? Was she afraid of it? No woman could lavish

more love on a man than Alice lavished on him.

She could scarcely bear him from her side; she leaned on him with utter dependence; she gave countless smiles and caresses. And he questioned what it all meant.

The exactions he had found charming a few short months ago grew a little wearisome.

She made them in a resistless manner, and he yielded to them—not as he had a few months ago because he loved them, but because he was partly conquered, partly swayed by his old chivalrous tenderness, partly from self-reproach.

For things seemed changing.

Then he said that, when the child was born they would come right again—it was all his fault that they were wrong.

Of course, she could love the child fully; she would have no dread lest he loved it too much.

It would not — it could not — part them; it would draw them together.

She was young, she loved him passionately; circumstances had thrown her almost exclusively on his love.

It was natural she should be a little jealous. When the time came she would understand.

That time came one evening, and Marjorie walked up and down the drawing room with light, slow steps, waiting for her cousin, whom she had just sent upstairs.

Now and then she paused, listening for some sound; sometimes glanced at the clock, wondering why the minutes seemed so long.

Then her face lighted up; and she crossed to the hearth, where a fire burned, for it was April.

"Here he is!" she said to herself. "I hope he will be pleased. Somehow he has not looked himself lately."

The door opened, and Ericsen came in.

The light went out of the girl's eyes, for he sat down opposite, not noticing her presence, and looked into the fire with lips set in pain and eyes full of sombre shadows.

Morjorie for a minute was as silent as he, then leaned forward and said gently——

"How do you like your new daughter?"

He looked up with almost a start, then half turned aside. "Poor little mite!" he muttered.

The girl's heart stood still. What did this curious, unnatural pity mean? Almost as those strange words left his lips, Ericsen said, smiling——

"I'm delighted with her, of course. Alice wants you to go and say good-night before you leave. I'm sorry I nearly forgot the message."

"I'll go at once. Mother is there still?"

"Yes, but she is going soon."

He came back to his seat after he had opened the door for his cousin, but this time, being alone, he dropped his head in his hands.

If this year of marriage had fallen short of his dreams, this was not the hour in which to recall that.

A man builds fresh hopes on the new claimant to love, and the glamor and brightness of early shadowless days come back.

So had Graham Ericsen built up such hopes, but none of this sweet natural change upheld them.

And only because, looking up from the baby daughter in his arms, he had met the eyes he sought—watchful, lowering.

Heart-sick, he sat over the fire with one persistent memory staring at him—Alice pouring out her heart to him and challenging a single thought of his not given to her. This was the end of his springing hope.

"That child is too delicate and pretty," Mrs. Fairfax said, as she and Marjorie drove home, having preemptorily refused Ericsen's escort. "I wonder if Graham thought so."

"He wouldn't know enough for that," said the girl. "What makes you think so, mother?"

"His manner — it was so very quiet, a little strange. He gave the child back to me without a word, and went straight out of the room."

"Did he?" was all Marjorie said.

She had never uttered her own fears to her mother; this matter of Graham's happiness was not one for talk to anyone, even if she had been sure of her ground.

She was not sure; she had not taken to Alice, and some subtle change in her cousin was apparent to her, but these things were not sufficient proof that he had made a mistake.

"It will want care—a great deal," Mrs. Fairfax resumed, "and I'm not sure Alice understands that; she is a little apathetic—not like most young mothers somehow."

"She told me once that she did not like children very much," said Marjorie.

"Doesn't she strike you as a trifle selfish?" said Mrs. Fairfax. "I suppose Graham wouldn't hear of it—he is so very devoted."

"I am afraid she is," said Marjorie, in a low voice. "I hope Graham won't go on giving way to her. She has such a tremendous power with that beauty of hers."

One day, when Alice was allowed to be on the sofa, Ericsen came in. The girl looked more beautiful than ever, her complexion transparent, her eyes a deeper color.

She wore a cream-colored morning gown, trim-

med with a profusion of lace and delicate ribbons.

Sumptuous things, whether dress or surroundings, suited Alice; they enriched her beauty, and her exquisite smile as her husband entered, just gave that beauty the finishing touch.

"All alone?" he said tenderly. He had seen her earlier in the day, but all the same, he bent down and kissed the smiling lips.

"I don't mind—now," Alice said, with happy eyes.

"But I can't stay, dearest."

"Not stay! when I was counting on having you!" she said, with a pitiful droop of her mouth.

Ericsen sat down on her cofa and took the white, soft hand.

"I'm sorry," he said gently, "but I must see Mr. Reeves."

"Reeves!—the detective!" Her brows contracted. "Is it an engagement?"

"Not exactly."

"Something you have heard?"

"Something I want to suggest to him."

"But that will do any time. What do you want to suggest?"

"Never mind. Alice — you never liked my pursuing the search, so I won't bore you with details."

"They don't bore me—you mistake. I didn't like being dragged home for a search that would go on without you; I think it is useless since after a year you are no further than you were; but, of course, what interests you interests me. Tell me your suggestion."

This in a coaxing tone, and the pretty head laid back against him.

It wasn't likely the man could guage very clearly what amount of consistency her words held.

"Is that why you always wanted to know what

we were doing?" he said, looking down into the liquid eyes she lifted. "Though anything recalling that time upsets you so, that I'm afraid I was sometimes hard-hearted and refused you."

"You won't refuse now?"

The tone, the look, were well-nigh irrestible in their witchery. Ericsen said, hesitatingly—"Let it be until you are stronger, and let me go."

"No, no, stay—a little. You can't be so unkind to me. I was lonely until you came."

Ericsen pressed her head closer against his breast, but he was silent.

This clinging love was sweet, but somehow—dimly he felt it—it seemed making him will-less, a poor sort of creature.

A stand must be made some time.

"Well, then," he said, at length; "perhaps I may have told you that we were visiting the chemists' shops now——"

"For the man who bought the chloroform—yes. It seemed an aimless effort to me."

"One must leave no stone unturned. I am going to suggest to Reeves to widen the inquiry. It is very probable the man did not buy it himself."

"I don't understand," said Alice.

"Someone else may have done it for him—whether man or woman."

"You are going to search—for a woman?" She gave a quick lift to her head, then sank it back again.

"But that is a wild-goose chase, surely. The drug may have been bought weeks before, or not bought for the purpose at all."

"Of course," said Ericsen, "the difficulties are tremendous. But one might light on a clue and possibly trace the movements of some particular person. It is

only one means of discovery we are taking. Come, Alice, I must be off."

She lifted her head, looking at him entreatingly.

"Don't be unkind," she said, with a half-sob. "I'm so lonely, and nervous—you leave me by myself, you wouldn't have done it once——"

"Alice, you ought to understand that there is a time for limitless claims. I don't deserve your reproach, if you meant it as one. While you needed continual service I gave it to you—put aside my own concerns, even the claims the dead have on me, more than perhaps I ought. But that must end some time. So kiss me, dear, and say good-bye for the present."

Alice, who had been biting her red lip hard, suddenly pulled herself away from him.

Ericsen got to his feet with a sense of being stunned.

"You don't love me as you used to," she said passionately. "You couldn't say such cruel things if you did. You never said them until that baby took you away from me."

"Alice!" he said, in a low, shocked tone. He gave back a step. She flung out her hands towards him.

"Oh! don't go like that!" she gasped. "Come back to me!"

He stood still, white to the lips, as if he had been struck a blow. She buried her face in the cushions and sobbed wildly.

"Alice — hush" said Ericsen, going to her hurriedly. He leaned over her and laid his hand on her head. "You will hurt yourself! What is it all about?"

"You never try to please me now. Those first months you hadn't a thought or a wish away from me—I mean that I didn't share! I want all your heart."

"Ah!" said Ericsen, still stroking the bowed head.

"All life can't be a honeymoon, my darling, and you must learn that. Don't be foolish, and cry over nothing, dear. You've got fancies in your head that mustn't stay there.

"There is nothing between us—certainly not your own child. I'm waiting for your kiss. I never go without it."

There was a second pause.

Ericsen was conscious of impatience — even irritation, with these tears, and the usual softening was slow in coming.

Then Alice lifted her face, lovely with its delicate flush, and the glitter of tears in the eyes.

A little melted — but only a little — he sat down again and gathered her into his arms.

"There, don't have any more tears," he said, kissing them away. I'm not sure I know now what you were crying about."

Instinctively he sought a refuge by treating her very much as a child, and throwing a certain brusqueness into his consoling.

Alice, on her side, did not melt readily beneath his kisses. She suffered them, and he felt she did.

A coldness crept over his heart and into his veins. He put her from him gently, and rose.

"You are angry with me!" the girl murmured plaintively.

"No, love. Angry? Absurd! I think you're very foolish to make yourself ill—that's all. I shall be back soon, and you'll have a smile for me then."

She smiled faintly now, but if he expected and wanted her to give him the kiss he always claimed on leaving her, she made no move to offer it.

She laid her face wearily in the cushions, and he left the room. But the first time of omitting a habit that has grown sacred!

It seemed to Graham's impassioned temperament like the beginning of the end. His stunned feeling deepened. Was it to make a slave of him she had held herself aloof?

No; life wasn't a honeymoon—something harder and more difficult.

"But it might be a honeymoon," flashed in the unbidden thought—scarcely a conscious one—"with some kinds of love."

Chapter 315

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

REEVES, the detective, was an extremely astute and experienced person, and he listened to Ericsen's suggestion with attention, but with bowed head. "You're still bent on prosecuting the search, sir?" he said.

"Yes, of course. Why?" answered Ericsen, in some surprise.

"We're no further than we were, sir, and I fancied you thought of that, seeing you've not been here much lately."

"I've been a good deal tied," said Ericsen, with an inward touch of shame; "but I intend fully to go on. You accept my idea then?"

"Yes, sir—it's pretty good. Many of these criminals have some woman who bought the stuff. I'm very much afraid It'll be an expensive job. And there's another thing occurred to me, sir. You remember the man who came to the inquest, and claimed the knife?"

"Yes, but he proved an alibi."

"It was proved in rather a negative way if you remember, sir, and only before the coroner; it wouldn't be the first time a coroner had let a man slip."

"You forget my London lawyer, whose interest it would be to fix suspicion on Fenwick. Besides, even on the well-worn 'frank' dodge system, the man, if in any degree implicated, would surely not run such a risk."

"It isn't likely, but I should like to follow him up. What was he doing at Earl's Monckton? He was close about that. Was he a stranger, I wonder?"

"But my wife, surely, would have had some recognition of him? She had none."

"Well, sir, she was a bit hesitating at first, but you see she took no notice of this third party, so her non-recognition doesn't go for much. You don't agree in my way, do you, sir?"

Ericsen, who had listened in a doubtful attitude, lifted his grey eyes.

"Not quite," he said, "but you may follow your line if it won't cost a great deal."

"No, sir, at present, only to go down to Earl's Monckton, and make some inquiries. I don't say my idea is worth much, but it's worth something. If he'd been a long while away from the neighborhood, and thought he could prove an alibi, he might risk it—for a good reason.

"That story about losing the knife — fishy!" shrugging his shoulders. "He looked more like a packet-rat than a genuine seaman, and that kind's up to a great deal."

"That sort of fellow would be more likely then to know he could not get the knife again," said Ericsen. "I can't see his motive for coming forward."

"Nor can I, sir, but something may turn up. One can't always see the whole way in these cases."

"No, one thing leads to another. I should think there would be a woman at the bottom of his being there in the place."

"That's my idea, sir, he was deuced dark about it. And he being what he is, I expect the woman is a rather better sort. Your suggestion just falls in with this, she might be a tool; I don't say she was in the know."

"And might have supplied the local knowledge," said Ericsen, thoughtfully.

"That's it, sir. There must have been someone

who knew the place and the people. Are you going to The Croft, sir?"

"I had thought of it, but my wife still declares that she cannot bear the place. She has never been near it since she left Earl's Monckton. I thought that, after more than a year, she might be able to go."

"Perhaps she's extra nervous, sir, till she gets up her strength. It's a pity, though, because the place isn't of much use to you."

"I shall go down myself for a few days to look after things," said Ericsen. "I suppose you ask the question intentionally."

"Yes, sir, I did. Your going alone will do pretty near as well. If you can spare me a half-hour I'll tell you my plan."

"I'm at your service, Reeves."

When he got home, after this conversation with the detective, Ericsen remained downstairs, in his study, writing some letters, and making other arrangements for his brief absence.

Presently a servant brought a message from Alice—she would like him to come up.

Ericsen had not forgotten what had passed an hour or two ago, the weight of it still sat on him. He obeyed the message immediately, however.

Alice had a pink flush in her cheeks, her eyes shone with almost feverish brightness.

"Graham, I've been so unhappy! Why didn't you come at once?" she said.

He sat down, and took her in his arms, but quite silently.

"Unhappy" wasn't the word for what he had felt, and felt still; it wasn't so easy for him to make up for the words that had ben said—perhaps because they were part of a terrible whole.

She nestled her head against him with a sigh of full contentment; but his silence, his stillness, were not to her liking.

She laid her head back and looked up to him. He brought his eyes down to her face, drawn after awhile by the intentness of her gaze.

"What is it?" he said heavily; he laid his hand mechanically over the dark hair.

"You can't forgive me!" she whispered—the tears came again.

"Forgive! Nonsense, my dear, don't think about it."

"Then kiss me——"

Did she remember the kiss she had denied him? He roused himself, forced a smile, and kissed the beautiful mouth.

"Now you'll be happy," he said.

"I'm as bad as that baby of ours," said Alice, still looking up to him. He only smiled, and she laid her head down again.

"Did you see your Reeves?" she asked.

"Reeves? Yes, I saw him," he said; "but I won't talk to you about it now, dear—you look excited as it is. Let me finish my letters — I'm going to the Croft tomorrow."

"To the Croft? Oh, to look after things, I suppose," said Alice, rather quickly. Then, with a change of tone, "Going to leave me?"

"You can live very well without me for a day or two," said Ericsen, lightly.

"No, I can't—it's only existence. And that horrible place! I hate places where people have died."

"Well, but I'm not asking you to go, dearest."

"I couldn't. Oh, how I wish—I wish——"

"Come, Alice, you know it's no use trying to dis-

suade me," he said, gently. "I shall forbid your hearing anything about my doings. It isn't good for you."

"No, it isn't."

"I was going in any case."

"Sell it!" she half breathed. All the time she was refusing to notice that he was putting her aside. He flushed up——

"Sell — the Croft!" he said, in a half strangled voice.

He got to his feet; then, as if he had gone too far, dropped to his knee beside her, and said more softly: "Never mind, Alice, you don't understand—and I have been harsh."

"No. I do understand—that I have pained you!" she murmured, with exquisite tenderness.

Half bewildered by her moods, melted, against his keen memories, by this mood, and swayed once more by his ineffable longing for happiness, Ericsen pressed her to him with the passion that belongs to conflict, not to great happiness.

Love isn't uprooted in a year—even the sort of love he bore her. But instinctively he used words that were a stay.

"My own wife," he said, "trust me! Forgive me!"

He held her lips with his, then loosed her almost abruptly, and went out of the room.

"What does it mean?" she gasped, sitting up, and staring out into the room with her wide eyes.

"Haven't I conquered? Isn't he going to love me any more? Oh, but he kissed me! he kissed me! Graham! Graham! my life—you are my very life! You shall love me or I die!"

She began to pace the room with her eyes riveted on the floor. The color came and went in her face, finally leaving it painfully white.

Alice was beginning to realize that she was fighting a losing battle. She could not control her husband's every move. Nor could she keep him away from Reeves, the detective.

When she thought of the latter her eyes took on a haunted look—a look of intense fear.

Chapter 316

THE NEW SERVANT.

ALICE came down to tea in the drawing-room for the first time the next day; she looked better and brighter, and her pretty tea-gown was a pleasure in itself. She announced that she was not going to be lazy any longer, and Ericsen said, smiling, it was nice to have her in her own place again.

She seemed also determined to overcome her nervous fears, for, in the midst of her fluent chat she asked what Reeves was doing, and mentioned one or two things she would like her husband to attend to at the Croft.

"And do you know what I have been thinking," she said, eating her toast with full appreciation of its crispness, "that it might be worth while to look after that man—what was his name?—that wanted his knife."

"What put that in your head, Alice?"

"I don't know. I've had a long bit of thinking this morning. You see, he was let go, but it might be worth while to follow him up."

"Exactly what Reeves suggested yesterday, and he is going to see after it," said Ericsen. "But you must not go to extremes, and talk about things you may dream of at night."

"It's you who make me so fanciful," sair she, playfully, "being so ful of fancies about me. So Reeves, the detective, thought of the same thing—how odd! And I suppose he is to work in real earnest."

"Yes—until he wins or loses."

"If he loses, what will you do? Drop the matter, I suppose? You will have no more clues."

"Oh, yes—you forget what I said about a woman buying the chloroform; but one really can't tell — that idea, too, may fail."

"Very likely. Dear me! I'm getting quite brave, am I not?"

"A little too brave, dear, and we'll talk of something else."

He went down to the Croft the next day a little lighter-hearted, and musing over Alice's new-found self control.

His uncle's old housekeeper had been retained in her situation, and, with a young maidservant under her, kept the house in good order.

Ericsen had a talk with her while she waited on him at dinner.

"I've been thinking," he said, "it would be better if you had a man in the place during the autumn, at least—the gardeners sleep out, and you have no protection for the dark nights."

"Well, Mr. Graham," said the old lady, who could not forget her ancient mode of address, "I should be very grateful. I had thought of asking you, but you're put to so much expense——"

"It won't be much," said Ericsen, smiling; "I've engaged the man, and he'll be able to do oll jobs in the house. The only drawback is he is not very strong, and I promised him plenty of fresh air, and not too continuous work. But I had a first-rate character with him, and he'll take good care of you."

"And, I hope, won't flirt with the girl, sir."

"Oh, that's another thing," said Ericsen, laughing, "but I'll guarantee he won't go further than is pardonable. He'll be down to-morrow before I return. I want to see him when he comes."

The man arrived the next day.

His good appearance, respectable manner, and imperfect health predisposed the old housekeeper in his favor; she was willing to give him indulgences.

Ericsen had a chat with the new dependent, and, after some luncheon, returned to town. There he told his wife the steps to be taken with regard to the man Fenwick, and Alice seemed pleased.

She promised secrecy. Ericsen knew this promise would be kept; Alice was a capital keeper of secrets.

The man, Austin by name, gave great satisfaction to Mrs. Dale and Lucy the maid.

To the first he was extremely useful and attentive; with the last he flirted in a mild and harmless way, just enough to give a touch of excitement to her dull life, especially as she had a real "young man" who was slightly jealous.

While the family were in town Mrs. Dale, for the sake of companionship, forbore to exercise her privileges, and took her meals with the two others.

On these occasions, and whenever Austin remained indoors during the evening, he was regaled with long and detailed accounts of the murder, with everybody's conjectures and opinions appended.

Also the household view of "Mr. Graham," who seemed a vast favorite; Mrs. Ericsen they did not know —she had never been to the Croft.

The history, as far as they knew and imagined it, of old Mr. Ericsen's opposition to the marriage was also served up.

In one way and another, too, Austin was made aware of who was who in the village and neighborhood, so that he came to know all the people's names as well as their faces.

He soon got on familiar terms with some of those of his own class—to the women especially he made him-

self agreeable.

Frequently he would spend an hour of the evening in one or another of the village inns, chatting with the habitues as they dropped in for their glass of ale and pipe.

Being fresh from London, Austin was an acquisition to the rustic folk.

One of these inns, the Hart and Hind, was set back among trees on the village green, over which the main road passed.

The place had been a coaching inn in the old days, and had a picturesque appearance. On these summer evenings the gossips sat on the benches encircling the trees, while on the other side of the green the boys shouted and quarreled at cricket.

A handsome girl, or rather woman, the landlord's daughter, brought out the jugs and glasses, and "churchwardens" for the use of the guests.

She would, perhaps, cut a caustic sort of joke, or give a curt greeting, and go away to some other duties.

She took no particular notice of the London man. She did not, as far as Austin could make out, seem much of a favorite with anyone.

She was certainly a considerable cut above most of the inn-frequenters — they called her "Miss."

Like many village inns, a farm was attached to the Hart and Hind, and the innkeeper was also a farmer.

As Martin Lester was, and had been for years, comfortably off and a widower with only the one child, Fanny had received what her father called "a good bringing up," so that in education and manners she was superior to the people she served.

Austin very soon noticed this, particularly as the girl struck him.

Not so much by her good looks as by a kind of restiveness about her, not common amongst women of her class, unless their life has had some story in it—possibly a commonplace one, but tragic to them.

Sitting one evening under the trees, some one started the ever green story of the Ericsen murder, and the talk was in full swing when Fanny appeared with a tray of fresh glasses.

"What! at that stale old story again!" said she, with a curl of her lip.

"It's none so old, Missie," said an elderly laborer, "and you was at the inquest."

"I daresay I wanted to see the Croft, and, besides, that's neither here nor there—the story is stale now."

"You forget," interposed Austin, pleasantly, "that I am a stranger, and what is stale to you is news to me."

She only shrugged her shoulders for answer, and began to put her glasses on the table, while Austin continued the subject.

It seemed singular that, annoyed as she had been at the thread-bare discussion, Fanny should perform her work so slowly that she had the air of purposely lingering.

She was listening to Austin's theories and suggestions more than to the other speakers.

He referred to a point occurring at the inquest, and another man differing from him, he appealed to the young woman.

"Perhaps your memory is better than ours, Miss," he said, with a touch of respect.

"I don't remember," said she, flushing slightly. And she walked off.

"She's always a bit cross grained," said the man.

"A love disappointment, perhaps," said Austin, laughing. "She is handsome enough to have had sweet-

hearts."

"More than she ought'er, maybe, my Missis says," was the answer. "Well, good-night, Mister—I'll be for getting home."

"My way lies with yours," said Austin.

On the road they continued to talk about Fanny.

"She turns up her nose at most," said Green, the laborer, "though, to be sure, she's a scholar, and Lester he has a good bit of land."

Austin smiled at this, but covertly.

"She is a remarkable fine-looking young woman," he said; "she ought to get married, certainly. I wonder, by-the-bye, she had time to attend that inquest — she always seems so busy. Perhaps she was interested——"

"In Mr. Graham, perhaps," guffawed the villager; "he's a handsome chap——"

"But he wasn't accused——"

"Well, nobody was, as one may say, except the seafaring chap."

Austin did not answer immediately, then he said:

"He wasn't exactly accused, from all I hear. Do you mean Miss Fannie was interested in him?"

"Lord, no! she ain't interested in no one, she ain't; she holds herself above the likes of him. Here's my road, Mister."

"And mine is here," said Austin. "Good-night."

He walked off swiftly. Arrived at the gardens surrounding the Croft, he paused under the deep foliage of the trees, and lighted a pipe slowly.

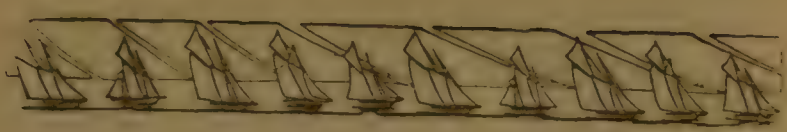
Then he opened the side gate near him, locked it, and went up to the house.

He did not go in right away, but sat on the front veranda and lit a cigar. From time to time a strange look came into his eyes.

"I wonder if any one suspects why I came here,"

he soliloquized. "I hardly suppose so. I am not a bad servant at that. But I'll have to be careful. If I am found out the game is spoiled."

Until nearly midnight he sat smoking and thinking. And occasionally he smiled. It was the smile of a man who knows how to keep a secret.



Chapter 317

FANNY LESTER

IT BECAME understood amongst his village associates that Austin had formed a decided opinion on the Ericsen murder case and the interest in that singular case strongly revived. Austin, with a superior air of wisdom, wondered what the coroner had been about to let off the man Fenwick, or the police to lose sight of him.

Fannie Lester listened to this talk with her usual manner, between indifference and scorn; but one day she said to Austin with a sort of dry anger; "You're in a great hurry to hang an innocent man."

"How do you know he is innocent?" asked Austin, leaning on the deal table, and looking up at her with a quiet penetrating glance.

"I don't know it," she retorted, "nor do you know he is guilty."

"It looks more like his guilt than his innocence."

"He was a stranger here."

"I don't believe he was; and if he were, some one —an inhabitant—might have supplied the local knowledge."

"An accomplice, you mean," said the girl, in the same half-contemptuous way.

"Yes."

"All to rob a poor old gentleman of an odd hundred pounds!"

"A hundred pounds," remarked Austin, quietly, "are to some men what thousands are to others."

"Oh, perhaps. I suppose you'll be putting the

police on the scent again," said she. "Sergeant Harris wasn't quite as sharp as you are, Mr. Austin, if one were to believe you."

"I find he is," answered Austin.

"What!" she said, starting forward—there was a tray of glasses in her hand, and they swayed and lipped, and almost fell. Austin rose quickly, and steadied them. "Take care, Miss Fannie," he said, smiling. Yes, I was talking to him the other day."

"Well, what'll he do?" she interrupted, half pettishly. "Thank you, Mr. Austin—the sleeve of my dress caught in a nail in this old table."

"I don't know what he'll do. I think Fenwick ought to be looked up."

"Did you say so?" she asked, with a furtive upward glance.

"Of course I did."

"I suppose you'll be going next to Mr. Graham, and telling him your new suspicion," said she, a little sneeringly. "He must be looking after his uncle's murderer."

"I might make a good thing of it if I did," said Austin, thoughtfully.

He turned to the paper he had been reading. The girl lingered, flicking off dust from the table, rearranging her glasses, but always, as the man felt, with eyes scanning him.

Then she walked off to the other customers who were sitting a little way from Austin.

Austin was in the same place the next evening—a pleasant corner under a tree—when the young woman came up, and asked if he required anything. He had a half empty glass of ale beside him.

"No, thank you," he answered, with his eyes still on his paper.

"Got your good things out of Mr. Graham?" she said, jocularly, after a pause.

"Not yet."

"Come now, do you really mean to play such a trick on a poor fellow?" said Fannie, insinuatingly.

Austin looked at her steadily.

"If the man is a murderer," he said, "I should be quite justified in 'playing such a trick,' as you call it. I didn't know your sympathies went his way. You forget, too, that Mr. Ericsen is my master—I have no connection with Fenwick."

"Well," said the girl, hesitatingly, "I was at the inquest every day, as you've heard the neigbors say, and I'd have sworn he had nothing to do with it."

"Ah, that's mere opinion."

"Now, just give me your reason for suspecting him," said the girl, sitting down and leaning her arms across the table. Her forehead had puckered up into anxious lines.

Austin made out a very black case against Fenwick; he weighed heavily on the man's refusal to give his reason for being in Earl's Monckton on the occasion of his alleged losing of the knife.

The girl listened intently, but she made no comment.

Then Austin went on to speak of the extreme likelihood of the supposed accomplice being a woman, and, perhaps, obtaining the chloroform.

Fannie turned rather pale, but still said nothing till he had finished. Then she asked what he was going to do.

"Tell my master what I think."

The girl got up and walked away.

Austin returned to his paper. A few day afterwards it reached her ears that Mr. Ericsen was expected

at the Croft.

That same evening Austin, as he opened the garden gate to go indoors, heard a woman's voice call him by name. He turned as if he were surprised.

"You, Miss Fannie!" he said.

"Look here," said the girl, clutching his arm, "I want ot talk to you about—about Fenwick. You may be something different from what you seem, but so much the worse if you are. Now I want to tell you about him."

Her face had a strained look, her voice was very hoarse.

Austin could not help a strong feeling of pity for her.

"I know him," she began.

"Sweethearts, I suppose," said Austin very gently. A wave of color passed over her face.

"Well—yes," she faltered; then, more firmly she said: "anyhow my friends know nothing about it; they wouldn't have looked at him; and that's why he came secretly to this place that time he lost the knife; he came to see me.

"He was going on a trip—a voyage, you know. It's true about the knife—he did get it in South America. You'll hold your tongue to my people, won't you, Mr. Austin?

"My father he'd turn me out of doors if he knew, but I'm trusting you for Harry's sake—that you may not think he's a murderer!"

She began crying bitterly.

Austin took her hand. The story might be in part made up, or it might not, but there was no doubt of the girl's affection for Fenwick, and less doubt of the relations between them.

"My poor girl," he said, "I am very sorry for you. No, I won't breathe a word to your people, of course.

Since you know Fenwick, perhaps you can tell me where he was on the day of the murder.

"Why, in London, as he said — out in the East-End," said poor Fannie, drying her tears; "and he'll be home from a trip in a fortnight; I'll tell you his ship—she's the 'Saucy Lass,' and she'll come into Liverpool."

"You're a sensible girl, Fannie—you've taken the best course you could."

"And I've never been in London since I was a little child, so I couldn't have got the chloroform there," she went on, eagerly, but more collectively on the whole. "Besides, Harry hadn't any money—why did he go out to sea again if he had? And then I wouldn't help even him to harm any one."

Austin was not so sure of that.

The sort of tragedy in the girl's life had made her defiant, but it also showed that probably she was weak where her emotions came into play, for she was of a better class than Fenwick, and had been well brought up.

And it was not to be supposed that had the man persuaded her to help him he would have openly told her that he was going to commit a murder.

Austin ascertained the probable date of Fenwick's arrival, promised secrecy, and comforted the girl's fear and distress.

He then offered to see her home, but she would not allow that.

"I don't want it to be known I've seen you," she said. "Thank you, Mr. Austin, you've been very kind to me. Good night."

"There's something genuine about that girl," mused the man, as he turned over the conversation in his mind. "She's too good for Fenwick, from all I hear. But, of course, she may be lying, and she may not by any means know all his doings.

"I remember he brought forward no substantial evidence to prove an alibi. But if she isn't lying she has cleared up one point as regards Fenwick, but mystified the whole case further. Who the deuce, and where, is the man we really want?"

Graham Ericsen had a letter sent him, part of which ran:

"It's no use of seeing Fenwick — he would be primed, and I could get nothing out of him. I propose inquiring in the East End haunts as to his alibi, and trying to find the purchaser of the chloroform."

To the regret of certain circles in Earl's Monckton Austin's health again failed; even the light duties of his present situation seemed too much for him.

He returned to London, the recipient of many small gifts and kindly invitations.

The wearisome search entered on a new phase, and, at the end of a few weeks, Reeves announced to his employer the result of part of his work.

"I've been doing the Fenwick business first, sir," he said, "and I find what he said was pretty well true. I can't think he's the third passenger; his time while he was in London is mostly accounted for.

"None of it was spent in chemist's shops; nobody knows of his having had money. I'll see him if you like, but it's not much use."

"I don't think it is," said Ericsen. "Well, we've tried and failed. I'm glad, however, the poor girl—Fannie, you call her—is not inculpated."

"At present, at any rate. In my next inquiries I might beat up against something to set me again on the Fenwick track—very likely if I find a woman did buy the drug."

"And if that fails I give up," said Ericsen.

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